



Faithful in the Face of Change

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I. WORSHIP IN THE VERNACULAR

The Protestant reformation insisted that the language of worship be the language of the people. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin understood this when they developed their hymnody. Not only did they want the language to be the vernacular; they also wanted the music of worship to be the music of the folk. Thus Luther and Calvin in their own particular ways worked to get German or French musicians to set the new vernacular texts. They thought it important, for evangelical reasons, that the people understood what they were singing. Those who brought the reformation to other countries quickly saw the evangelical benefit of using the vernacular and gladly translated Luther's texts into their own languages and musical idioms. The Roman rite, to the reformers, was imperial; the reformation, speaking the gospel with words and music springing from the roots of the indigenous culture, was evangelical. The Second Vatican Council vigorously appropriated this spirit: to be indigenous was important to the reform.¹

Protestants might get a feel for the excitement of the reformation when they look at the ferment and upheaval of Roman Catholics during the language change in the 1960s and 1970s. Not bound to a tradition or untouchable canon of important hymns, the Catholics have been free to take much of the hymnody of the current culture.² For Protestants, the accumulated tradition, or canon, of hymnody may

¹"Even in the liturgy the Church does not wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not involve the faith or the good of the whole community. Rather does she respect and foster the qualities and talents of the various races and nations. Anything in these people's ways of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error she studies with sympathy, and, if possible, preserves intact. She sometimes even admits such things into the liturgy itself, provided they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit." *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* III. D. 37, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. Abbott (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966) 151.

²One sees this most clearly in the development of the canon of hymns *Worship III* (Chicago: G. I. A., 1986). It has borrowed liberally from the Protestant past, as well as felt more free than any Protestant hymnal to make extensive use of the less familiar hymns of the current "hymn explosion" which began in the 1960s and continues apace in this country.

have become the problem. In order for each church to remain faithful to its founding vision and to continue to shape its adherents so that they remain true Wesleyans or Lutherans or Presbyterians, etc., each community has felt obligated to teach its particular tradition of worship and hymnody alongside a vigorous and happy engagement with the treasures of other denominations.³ Americans all know and want to sing a fairly common list of hymns, given a few regional or ethnic differences here and there. This may mean that most Protestant churches are

staggering under the weight of a musical tradition which has perhaps grown as oppressive and alien as the old medieval rite rejected by the reformers for not being indigenous.

II. A MUSICAL *KULTURKAMPF*

At the same time, we must also consider the break in tradition which occurred in all churches during the 1960s and which has now flowered into the *Kulturkampf* described by Peter Berger in a recent *Christian Century* article.⁴

Two things contributed to the rupture of that moment: (1) the student upheaval in the universities and the discovery of a multi-cultural perspective on the past; (2) the culmination of a century-long obsession of worship and hymnal committees to *restore* the liturgy and hymns from their corrupted state to their original glory. Both of these ruptures with the past were facilitated as well by strong support from what Peter Berger and others have called the new “information class,” which “took over the bureaucratic machinery” of the churches and helped create the new churches of mainline culture developed in the 60s and 70s.⁵ Anti-bourgeois and politically correct, this class took for granted that the church had to change. Protestant liturgocrats, supported by the “new class” of the church’s bureaucracy, rejected the received tradition and returned their communities back to the edenic idea of the unified church of the fourth century, before the great ruptures in church history; hymnologists returned to original versions (both musical and textual) of the chorales or psalm tunes, disrupting the resources in the memory banks of most faithful Christians. To regular middle-class church people, this felt as though they were no longer in as intimate a connection with their own spiritual roots and experience as they had been, no matter how vigorously the restorers argued their innovations were closer to the original spirit of Jesus, Luther, Calvin, or Wesley. To those in the pews, it was a disruption. Language changes and the out-of-hand rejection of hymns deemed politically or theologically incorrect meant a wholesale rejection of many of the old favorites of the nineteenth century and took away another large portion of the tradition from unsuspecting people in the mainline denominations.

In addition, the loss of Sunday and Wednesday evening services from many of these churches, and the shunning of the camp-meeting tradition, meant that a significant part of the canon of hymns or songs which were not deemed appropri-

³Linda J. Clark, in her fascinating *Music in the Churches Project*, notes that one can still tell the kind of congregation in which one is worshipping, despite what some might think. “Report # 1: Description of the Project,” *Boston University School of Theology Music in the Churches Project* (27 June 1990) 4.

⁴Peter L. Berger, “Reflections of an Ecclesiastical Expatriate,” *Christian Century* (24 October 1990) 964-969.

⁵*Ibid.*, 964-969.

ate for Sunday morning, but had been cherished by many in the mainline Protestant tradition, no longer received a hearing. The 1964 United Methodist hymnal, for example, eschewed many gospel songs as not appropriate to a hymnal for Sunday worship.⁶ Though it is not widely known or admitted by their liturgical leadership, Lutherans also knew and loved these songs, but lost them as well, when their manifold variety of Sunday school songbooks and youth hymnals were no longer published by Lutheran publishers, who sensed—rightly—that the Lutheran musical establishment would frown on them for their bad musical and theological taste.⁷

This meant that Sunday morning in the mainline churches, because it was the only worship experience of the week, became more and more monochromatic in style, even as the culture demanded more and more colorful and varied styles. Most ironically for the makers of hymnals and liturgical services, just as the mainline churches were becoming more formal and less personal, the younger generation was demanding informality and personal experience in its worship. This was especially true of the Lutherans with their *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) which came too early to reap much benefit from the multicultural hymn explosion of the '80s, yet late enough to be affected by political correctness and liturgical efforts to re-pristiniate another century as the ideal for worship and hymnody. In their efforts to modernize the language of worship and hymns, executed with Teutonic consistency, Lutherans rendered the hymns and worship materials stylistically uniform. This had the effect of changing all hymns into modern hymns without producing any modern hymns. The same charge had been leveled against hymnals compiled during the enlightenment. The 1798 Danish *Evangelisk-christelige Psalmebog*, for example, in tune with the spirit of its age, had revised and modernized all the hymns it had received from the past. This made it uniform and dull—and boring to its users.⁸ It is impossible to think of the revisions and modernizing of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* without thinking of the enlightenment's confidence that it had every right to "update" things to meet with the needs of "modern" men and women. In another way as well the liturgical movement confidently "backdated" everything from the more recent past so it would be consistent with the most ancient past. For whatever reasons, no matter how contradictory, the rupture with people's past worship experiences was far-reaching.

For Protestants this loss of connections with the familiar language and canon of hymnody could only be disastrous, as indeed the enlightenment had been for worship after the revisions of that day. Christian Bastholm's proposal to modernize worship in the Danish realm, while coming from a pastor concerned for declining church attendance and the relevance of worship to the people of the day, vitiated hymnody when put into action.⁹ In Denmark, for example, after the

⁶The most recent 1989 *United Methodist Hymnal* redresses this situation in many interesting ways. See the review in this issue of *Word & World* by John Yarrington (pp. 256-260).

⁷The ironies of taste persist. Nathan Hatch shows in his trenchant book *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale Univ., 1989) that the very pearls of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, namely the Sacred Harp songs, were denounced in the most extravagant terms by mainline church musicians in the nineteenth century. See also Jane Rasmussen, *Musical Taste as a Religious Question in Nineteenth Century America: The Development of Episcopal Church Hymnody* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1986).

⁸H. Blom Svendsen, *Norsk Salmesang* vol. 1, *Arven fra gammel tid* (Bergen: Lunde, 1935) 62.

⁹Christian Bastholm, *Forsög til en forbedret Plan i den udvortes Gudstieneste* (Copenhagen: 1785).

revisions found in the 1798 hymnal, *Evangelisk-christelige Psalmebog*, congregational hymn singing, according to Peter Balslev-Clausen, was disrupted for a century.¹⁰

Lutherans have, since Martin Luther, used hymns liturgically. That is to say, they have had a long tradition out of the *Deutsche Messe* ("German Mass") of singing certain hymns for the ordinary of the mass: "All Glory Be to God on High" (*LBW* #166) was the Gloria for many of them for hundreds of years. They are used to singing hymns to move the service from one mood and thought to another. Prose texts with liturgical settings have not, as a rule, done that in a Lutheran service until recently. Even though the musical settings are sung every Sunday, they

will not achieve the significance of a favorite hymn. They do, however, take the time a favorite hymn would take in the service. With an increasingly complex and lengthy liturgical service, which began for most American Lutherans with the 1958 *Service Book and Hymnal*, fewer and fewer hymns have been sung in the service.¹¹ Since Lutherans (and I think most Protestants) do not feel as if they have participated in a worship service unless they have sung hymns, this has had the effect of removing them from the worship service and leaving the congregation outside the service, listening to the choir and pastor sing the liturgy—with only one or two hymns, not always familiar ones at that. This is the very situation Luther wanted to reform.¹² In the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, which many congregations use without attention to the freedom it allows to use several hymns, only two hymns are required. This has the effect of rendering worship non-participatory and no longer the “work of the people,” since the people, no matter what they are told, participate principally through the singing of familiar hymns.

It is precisely here that the question of faithfulness and integrity to the tradition become so complex. How does a worship committee think of being true to the tradition as it plans its services? Theologically? Thematically? How does it consider the way human beings experience the service as it proceeds? A friend of mine spoke of watching a woman go to receive communion while the congregation was singing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” a hymn she would not have picked to fit the sermon text or topic of the day. She noticed, however, that the young woman, a stranger to the congregation, wiped tears from her eyes as she stood up from communion. While she had no idea what caused the emotion, she wondered if the worship committee, of which she was a part, ever thought of how the service actually affected people. Something of the same thing happened to Linda J. Clark, who teaches sacred music at Boston University School of Theology, when she heard the noted liturgical scholar, Mark Searle, speaking at a meeting of the North American Academy of Liturgy. Searle, she writes, observed that “the reason Catholic congregations do not sing at Mass is not that they do not *want* to

¹⁰Conversation with Peter Balslev-Clausen, August, 1990.

¹¹Some might argue that the 1888 “Common Service” created by those around the Philadelphia Seminary began this trend in American Lutheranism. More correctly, one would have to say it began with the *Church Book with Music*, edited by Harriet Krauth Spaeth in 1868. This book was responsive to the reforms of the Oxford Movement as well as those of Wilhelm Löhe in Germany. The “Common Service” was put together by a committee which looked at all the German *Agenden* from the “pure” Lutheran liturgies of the sixteenth century and developed a service based on the most common shape of the many *Agenden* which they chose to use. One critic of this process has noted fairly that, when it was finished, the “Common Service” resembled exactly Löhe’s *Agende*.

¹²For an excellent presentation of this argument, see Peter Balslev-Clausen’s “Salmerne og gudstjenesten,” *Hymnologiske Meddelelser* 18 (April 1989) 5-29.

sing; it’s because what they are given to sing *they do not like*.” Clark reports that the statement “reoriented” her “scholarly viewpoint a full 180 degrees.” Instead of looking for answers about how to invigorate worship and music in the church in the libraries, she said, she developed a “systematic way of asking the people in the pews and choir lofts what they thought and felt about it.”¹³

Saying this publicly, as she did at the 1991 Hymn Society Meeting at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, raised the hackles of many. Clark’s suggestion that musicians actually consult the people in the pew outraged many who thought the people had no wisdom to share on

the issue. The new class of bureaucrats described by Peter Berger was perfectly represented in the group by a former officer of a large mainline church who took great umbrage at the suggestion that people should be *allowed* to sing old, traditional favorites. It was her job as a leader in the church to lead people out of their parochial ways, she contended, from A to Z, not just A to B—as she perceived Clark to be suggesting. As she spoke, the devastating effect of Berger’s *Kulturkampf* became clear. The mainline churches had actually had the confidence to hope they could survive a leadership in fundamental conflict with its membership, the people who found comfort singing such déclassé hymns as “In the Garden.” Indigenizing the Christian church in America seems to offend these representatives of the new class, whose distaste for things American is complete.

The woman described in the previous paragraph is not alone in urging the indigenization of the faith in other cultures, while resisting the indigenization of the church in America. Lutherans speak solemnly of “the” Lutheran tradition and canons of good taste when they want to drive out whatever music they don’t like. It has not always been thus, however, especially for those with a concern for mission or evangelism. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the founder of American Lutheranism, an organist trained at Halle, the school of the Pietists, set about his mission work with evangelical cunning. He understood instinctively the need to use the music and language of the people when evangelizing. When discussing the work of his father-in-law, Conrad Weiser, with the Native Americans, he quoted approvingly Weiser’s notion that in order to convert them, one would have “to learn the Indian melodies and tones and propagate the Law and Gospel with these tones so that it would make an impression and then with God’s blessing and help await the fruitage.”¹⁴ As a resident of an English colony and an evangelist, Muhlenberg was friendly to George Whitefield, the English evangelist who visited the colonies several times, and he spoke approvingly of the “winning qualities” of Dr. Isaac Watts’ hymns.¹⁵

The Lutherans in America, however, who were heirs to the Muhlenberg tradition at Philadelphia, among them Charles Porterfield Krauth, Adolph Spaeth, and Harriet Krauth Spaeth, imbibed the Anglo-Catholic revival of their time and spoke of improving the taste in the hymnals and worship books. They began a tradition of revising and restoring, along with their teachers and counterparts in the Anglican tradition. They disliked the “crude” music of the gospel song and

¹³Clark, “Report # 1,” 1.

¹⁴*Journals of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg*, trans. Theodore Tappert and John Doberstein, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Lutheran Historical Society of Eastern Pennsylvania, 1982) 168.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, vol. 2, 684.

worked to introduce Anglican chants and more ancient forms into Lutheran worship. Their chief successor, Luther Dotterer Reed, in his fundamental work *The Lutheran Liturgy*, scorned the German mass as being only for the “uneducated” masses.¹⁶ Along with others, he worked to get the Lutheran churches in this country to prefer the *Formula Missae* on the grounds of taste. That the Lutheran emigrants flooding the new country preferred the old familiar hymns and liturgies to the new, more “tasteful” and “correct” hymns and liturgies made little impression on these cultured men and women. They were intent on raising standards.

They had drunk from the same springs as Robert Bridges, the English poet, whose

aesthetic sensibilities were similarly distressed by the uncultured and average singer in the congregation, who was always, to Bridges, “a narrow mind and a vulgar being.”¹⁷ Those who followed in his steps with *The English Hymnal*, Vaughan Williams and Percy Dearmer, hoped their hymnal would improve the taste of the “common man,” who, upon hearing better music, would prefer it to the inferior music he knew. At root, it seems, all the projects to improve the musical taste of congregations were based on the notion that the congregation should sound like a choir. One can find this conviction in nearly all the great Lutheran college choral conductors of that day, who were highly successful in teaching their charges much about the “Lutheran” choral tradition, but failed to teach them the difference between performance and congregational participation. Their faithfulness in transmitting the tradition may have prevented them from keeping hymnody flourishing in the congregations.

Perhaps the question is finally one of spirit vs. letter. How can we be faithful, in our fashion, to a tradition which has shaped us and continues to feed us, while watching our people very carefully to see what it is that actually does move them? As Linda Clark put it succinctly in one of her reports, both planners of worship, clergy and musicians alike, and congregations desire “coherence” in their worship.¹⁸ They are, however, interested in a “coherence” of different sorts. For those planning worship, the lessons, sermon, and hymns should all have a theological coherence. In addition, those musicians planning the music, both choir and organist, prefer variety and higher levels of difficulty to simple repetition. For the congregation, however, coherence means making connections with old “icons” (such as “The Old Rugged Cross”) and transforming new problems in life by connecting them with these old “icons.” This is a hard notion to convey. The prejudices against “pandering” to the consumer culture, and fears of entertainment evangelism or of having bad taste, too often prevent us from making the “coherent” connections which move people. The prejudices of the new informa-

¹⁶“It is clear that in Luther’s own mind this service possessed limited rather than universal significance. When the Elector desired to introduce the German Mass everywhere by authority, Luther objected. Luther never abandoned the type of service outlined in his *Formula Missae*. The German Service was largely for the uneducated laity, a simplification of the historic Order adapted to the needs and abilities of a part of the people....The German Service sought to promote congregational participation and to retain as much as possible of the historic Service for use in the villages and where there were no capable choirs.” Luther Dotterer Reed, *Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947) 77.

¹⁷Robert Bridges, “A practical discourse on some principles of hymn-singing,” *Journal of Theological Studies* I (1899-1900) 40-63; quoted in Nicholas Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 321.

¹⁸Clark, “Report #2: Singing in Church,” *Boston University School of Theology Music in Churches Project* (November 9, 1990) 2.

tion class fly in the face of the old bourgeois tastes and prejudices. They want to change what the people like and have a prophetic air about them as they work to discredit the memory and faith of the people, regardless of results in outreach and mission.

Thorstein Veblen, in observing society, developed a concept which he called “trained incapacity.” Using the instance of chickens who had learned to come to eat at the sound of a bell, and who would come again when the bell sounded, but this time for their slaughter, Veblen noted their training would, as Kenneth Burke says, “work against them.”¹⁹ One cannot but think of this

notion when observing the massive revisions of hymnody and liturgy undertaken by the information classes in the mainline Protestant churches over the last decades. The alienation caused by these revisions (and I admit to being a culprit in this work of revision), the growing formality of worship, and the increasing hierarchy and bureaucracy in the ministry at precisely the time people in America are calling for more informal, egalitarian small groups, give one cause to be pessimistic about the future of the mainline churches. We have developed a “trained incapacity” to take in the data. On the other hand, there are sensitive and masterful people out there whose commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ gives them the power to be “wise as serpents and gentle as doves,” for the sake of the gospel.

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR WORSHIP TODAY

One can say several things about the state of things today. First, the Protestant principle of speaking the language of the people for their edification and comfort should loom large for us. How to use the accoutrements of the culture without being captive to it is an enduring problem, one that has occupied our ecclesiastical leadership overly much since the 1960s. The question is important, but, on the other hand, we don’t advise missionaries to greet the culture to which they are witnessing with contempt and disdain. It is a poor mission tactic anywhere in the world, even America. Like it or not, we have to learn to speak American.

Second, all mainline churches, especially Lutherans, are looking for some kind of contact with what the tradition has called the “spiritual song” or “gospel song.” They have been banished from the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, for one, and are lost to the memory of the young, but they still persist in the memory of the old. This year is the 100th anniversary of the *Hemlandssånger* song book of the Swedish Augustana Synod in the United States. It was well-loved in the Augustana Synod, as much, if not more, than the hymnal. Of the 500 songs in the book, 100 were by Lina Sandell. She was a Swedish Lutheran pastor’s daughter from Småland, Sweden, whose songs gave heart to most Swedish emigrants who retained any contact with the church. All the early Swedish Lutheran pastors used this tradition and vigorously promoted it. Today it is lost to Lutherans, but loved in Covenant and other Reformed circles. Ironically, Lutherans have given away a most popular part of their hymnological treasures. To be faithful and evangelical, Lutherans need to reconnect with this tradition. It still lives!

¹⁹Thorstein Veblen, as quoted in Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change*, Second Revised Edition (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965) 7.

Third, let the choir be the choir and the congregation the congregation! Too often congregations are given to think they are poor singers and cannot or should not sing out because they cannot sing that music which is superior and well-loved by the choir. Everybody should sing in church, from the monotone to the opera singer. Hymn singing is the last kind of folk singing people do, and it is best done when the hymns are closer to folk than art songs.

Fourth, people want to sing more hymns during worship, especially the old favorites. Linda Clark reports that for 65% of the Episcopalians in her study, even more than for United Methodists, hymn singing is the most meaningful part of worship. The new worship service in many of the mainline hymnals (frequently known as worship books, not hymnals—a telling change in itself) allows for fewer and fewer hymns during the service. For Lutherans, many of

whom have lively memories of services with more hymns than liturgy, this is troubling. Using a modern adaptation of Luther's *Deutsche Messe* with popular, fitting, favorite hymns could solve this problem. This would have the added benefit of allowing instant indigenization, since the worship planners could pick hymns and songs from the congregation's own tradition. This mission emphasis should not be overlooked.

Fifth, today Sunday morning has to do all at once what Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening prayer meeting once accomplished. This means that wise planners of worship will have to include all varieties of hymns and songs in the one Sunday service so they can use many of the congregation's favorites. This also means that one needs a variety of styles during each service, not one service in one style, and another service in another style. Many years ago at a worship conference in Valparaiso, Indiana, Heinz Werner Zimmermann argued that the music of worship had to be eclectic in order to be successful. This seems more true today than ever before. It may be possible to entice jaded television couch potatoes out of their sloth and get them to church on Sunday evenings once in a while, simply for the joy of singing with their family, but not often. Hymn singing in church is one place where people will sing, if rightly encouraged, and in singing they open themselves to God and their neighbor in ways that are refreshing. We should give them every opportunity to do this.

In January of 1992, in a small group of pastors discussing this problem, as the question of taste and theological correctness kept nagging, a pastor in the group announced that he had been taught not to like "In the Garden" ("trained incapacity") and he didn't, even though his grandmother always sang it. Now she was long gone. When he goes to visit the old people's home, now, he said, he sings "In the Garden" to the old women there because they like it, and it connects him (gives "coherence") to the communion of saints. He has come to understand that something is being touched and moved by this action and that it gives significance to their lives. He now knows that theology is not poetry, and poetry is not theology. Like Muhlenberg, and countless others before him, he is in the business of evangelism out of concern for the neighbor, not for his own inviolable good taste.